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Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

New trends in communication – branding and content marketing

Note by German Federal Statistical Office (Destatis)

Summary

This document presents elements of communication strategy adopted by Destatis. The strategy aims to convey more effectively the reliability of the statistical office based on quality data and transparent methods, and thus strengthen the office's reputation and increase the appreciation of official statistics. The strategy uses marketing techniques, branding, tailoring statistical products to users' needs, public relations, better transparency and measures to increase statistical literacy.

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I. Introduction

1. In the era of data overload, authoritative facts and the ways in which they are communicated are becoming increasingly important. The authority and credibility of statistics has become a main issue. Official statistics need to stand out from others as being a guaranty for quality statistics.

2. Statistical organizations should develop promotion strategies to advertise their strengths, ensuring that they connect effectively and efficiently with their users and build their reputation as providers of trustworthy data. In this document, authors will make the case for statistical offices to make more use of marketing tools to get the brand official statistics known as a trustworthy source of information, to convey the message about the value[1] (quality) of their data and bring statistics to life by using different communication channels, tools and techniques.

II. Branding

3. To deal with the increasing amounts of data, people need to be more aware about the quality and reliability of data. Quality should become the decisive factor when choosing a data source. That is where official statistics can stand out of the piles and piles of other data. National statistical offices (NSOs) produce official statistics and strive for accuracy, reliability and uncompromised objectivity using the best methods, as enshrined in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics[2]. NSOs should therefore work towards strengthening the brand of "official statistics" vis-à-vis other data producers by emphasizing the quality aspects of their data as the main competitive advantage.

4. It is thus necessary to explain clearly on the institution's website the quality framework/guidelines and all the measures that are put in place to ensure the quality of the data. NSOs should make a clear and concise quality statement that summarizes how they implement the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, thus guaranteeing the reliability, objectivity and high quality of the products they produce, in distinction from other data providers that do not apply the Fundamental Principles rigorously.

5. This alone does not convince users of the quality of our data. In Europe, we have put in place the European Statistical System statistics code of practice[3] as a guarantor for quality and have recently adopted a quality declaration[4]. These are important cornerstones but we have to transmit these values to our users. This is branding: we have to raise the awareness of users of the quality of our data and thus improve the trust in our institutions.

III. Communication strategy

6. Statistical offices have to first internally position themselves on how they would like to be perceived by the users (NSO's key message: you can trust our institution and our data). Secondly, develop a communication strategy stating the goals to reach. This provides the basic frame for action. Destatis has developed a communication strategy[5] based on 5 pillars: strengthen the brand of "official statistics", improve access, meet the needs of target

[1] https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/2017/CES_4_E_Value_of_official_stats.pdf

[2] https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/FP-New-E.pdf

[3] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-manuals-and-guidelines/-/KS-32-11-955

[4] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/64157/4392716/quality-declaration-ESS.pdf

[5] https://www.destatis.de/EN/AboutUs/CommunicationStrategy/CommunicationStrategy.html

groups, expand the dialogue and improve understandability. Third, choose a marketing approach.

7. Which set of marketing and communication methods could we use to distinguish the NSOs and official statistics from competitors and create a lasting impression in the minds of our users?

IV. Getting the brand known: "Open copyright"

8. A first step to start to build the brand is to use "Open copyright" as an incentive for users to refer to official statistics and make sure that the source is always present and correctly quoted.

9. It is important to provide products displaying a clear copyright that can be used by different media (ready to use graphs, infographics and interactive maps). The trademark "official statistics" should be perceived as a seal of quality for the users increasing the trust in statistical offices institutions and ultimately in their data.

10. In Germany, the trademark of the NSO refers to "Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis)", to make clear that we are talking about a sole institution. In this effort to make their trademark known, Destatis has started to clearly display it in graphs and ready made tables that can be used by newspapers, magazines and other sources. These ready to use interactive graphs can be used in different internet platforms making the official statistics brand known.

V. Building the trust in "official statistics"

11. How to make sure that the brand "official statistics" is associated to high quality statistics and NSOs are considered as trustworthy sources?

12. In this section, we will list some tools that can be used by NSOs to increase trust of users by improving user engagement and user focus. We will illustrate this with examples based in our experience at Destatis.

A. Data with personal relevance for users

13. Statistics frequently use concepts that are meaningless to the majority of the persons; these are complex and abstract artifacts that need to be translated to be meaningful to people. An everyday example is the inflation rate – it needs to be disaggregated to be understandable. Users need to find and identify themselves in the data NSOs produce: an average alone is most of the time meaningless. It is necessary to provide the context and to communicate the range so that persons find themselves reflected in the numbers. This increases the trust of the users in the data. Statistical offices need to develop the ability to put themselves in the place of the users.

B. Transparency

14. Another measure to ensure trust is to be transparent about the methods that the NSOs use, and clearly state divergences in numbers. A recent example of transparent

reporting in Destatis was the way we published the differences in the different calculations behind the number of citizens with double citizenship[6].

15. Transparently explaining the strengths and weaknesses of particular statistics is an essential part of the communication to users as is providing impartial interpretation of what underlies trends and comparisons.

C. Dialogue with users

16. Statistical offices can also increase trust by engaging in constant dialogue with their users, which can take many forms such as showing that their feedback on issues is taken seriously. This builds up the trust and enhances the reputation of the institution and ultimately of the data produced. Effective user engagement should be a continuous dialogue, not just a series of one off consultations.

17. NSOs need to make an extensive analysis of what is being said about them in social media and react when needed. It is necessary to respond to what is being said in the different platforms, show that NSOs are listening and handle important issues in the platforms where the users are active, i.e., by going to their meeting place (e.g. Twitter, Instagram). Talk with the network and spread the statistical office brand. Actively participate. It is not a question of how many there are, but who they are and of what the NSO has to communicate.

18. In Destatis we received positive feedback via Twitter after we changed our press releases to clearly state the methods and data sources used as a reaction to previous criticism by journalists. This contributes to establishing our brand as an institution that people can trust thus also bringing them to trust our data.

D. Public relations: influencers

19. NSOs can also resort to advertise their message by making use of influencers: identifying individuals that have influence over potential users, and orient marketing activities around these influencers. NSOs can resort to having their messages repeated by "influencers" who have a good reputation that gives weight to their message and expands its publicity. For example, in its 2015 annual report, Destatis included an interview with a State Minister.

VI. Content marketing

20. The majority of the public, however, will never directly consult a statistical office or look to it as a source of news. For most citizens, it was the news media itself – newspapers, radio and television – that provided their exposure to official statistics. As the "gatekeepers" to the public, the news media gave statistical offices a powerful tool to fulfill a critical part of their mandate. But many statistical offices have already gone a step further pursuing a new goal – starting to act as news agents themselves by publishing news via social media channels (e.g. Twitter) or by developing products that can be easily used by the media (e.g. interactive infographics, videos). Two examples in this domain are the case of statistical offices of the Netherlands[7] and Mexico[8] both producing videos for the media.

[6] https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/InFocus/Population/DualCitizenshipHolders.html

[7] https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb

[8] http://en.www.inegi.org.mx/

21. Still the extent to which statistical offices can collaborate with the news media, and communicate effectively through them, has an enormous impact on how well they can inform the general population. A good example is the relation that the UK statistical office (ONS) has developed with BBC. The BBC has recently commissioned an independent study "Making sense of statistics"[9] to analyze how statistics are being reported. It concludes by highlighting the importance of data journalists for successful communication. Destatis has for instance held recently a special workshop for data journalists.

22. Destatis has also started to take its first steps in another front in an effort to establish its brand through content marketing. This is a new trend in leading German enterprises like Daimler and Telekom. At Destatis this is done by using software to research which topics are being discussed in different websites, which ones have a high relevance and in which statistics are not well represented, and analyze how to bring statistics into these sites. It can be through making new statistical contents available or just by making the website owner aware of already existing products, highlighting the advantages of having this statistical information. When this happens, the marketing campaign is successful.

23. This is associated with a change in the institutional culture of Destatis – it is no longer enough to produce statistical products that answer user needs and wait for them to come and get it from our website. We need to place these products in the relevant platforms and formats to increase the impact.

VII. Statistical literacy

24. The promotion of statistical literacy and culture as a basic pillar of statistics use is highly important and constitutes a major task of the statistical institutions. There is a need for enhancing statistical literacy among all segments of current and potential users.

25. Statistical culture, promoted by the national statistical institutions among the large public should lead to decreased misunderstandings and increased capability of understanding the significance and meaning of statistical information, of analyzing and using the data provided to the public.

26. Destatis has invested in visualization tools and e-learning modules aiming to improve statistical literacy. One of the most useful is the module that helps to avoid the common pitfalls of statistical interpretation[10]. Whilst enhancing the statistical literacy of users, these measures also contribute to increasing trust.

27. Finally and to make use of the Agenda 2030[11] motto, NSOs should leave no one behind and effectively reach all users. In Destatis this is also done by having contents in sign language. This increases our understandability, increases trust and establishes our brand.

VIII. Conclusions

28. The main message for statistical offices is that their reliability based on quality data and transparent methods should be conveyed through an effective communication strategy thus building a specific brand. To this end, NSOs can resort to marketing techniques, production of statistical products tailored to users' needs, measures to increase statistical

[9] http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/stats_impartiality/report.pdf

[10] https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/StatistikCampus/ELearning/Module/Modul14/MittelwerteDurchschnitte.html

[11] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld

literacy and being transparent. This is of strategic importance for increasing the appreciation of official statistics and leading users to perceive the statistical offices as trustworthy.